

DODD, LIEBERMAN, LARSON REQUEST THAT BRISTOL SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE REMAIN OPEN

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 13, 2006

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HARTFORD – U.S. Senators Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) and U.S. Representative John B. Larson (D-CT) today wrote to Social Security Commissioner Jo Anne Barnhardt requesting reconsideration of a proposal to close the Social Security office in Bristol and merge its operations with an office in New Britain and expressing their opposition to the proposed consolidation.

In the letter, the legislators outlined arguments raised during meetings with the community and local officials in Bristol. They also participated in a public meeting with representatives from the Social Security Administration on October 5 at Bristol City Hall.

The text of the letter is below:

October 13, 2006

Ms. Jo Anne B. Barnhart
Commissioner Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235-0001

RE: Proposed closing/consolidation of the Bristol, CT Social Security Office to New Britain.

Dear Commissioner Barnhart:

We would like to respectfully request reconsideration of the proposal to close the Bristol Social Security Office. We are united in believing that this proposal should be rejected. As you know, Regional Commissioner Manuel Vaz and Government Relations Director Kurt Czarnowski of the Boston Regional Office visited Bristol on Thursday October 5th to explain the proposal. We were pleased to hear Mr. Vaz emphasize that no final decision has been made on this matter, and we were on hand to listen to the public's response.

First, we note that the alleged savings would be minimal since the staff caseload for Bristol appears to be virtually identical to the staff caseload in New Britain. Therefore, there would be no cost savings from personnel. Based on demographic data shown in the Consolidation of the New Britain and Bristol Service Areas report submitted to our offices, the Bristol office serves approximately 12,000 clients with a total staff of five (5) employees. In addition, the report shows that the New Britain office services approximately 35,000 clients with a total staff of sixteen (16) employees. The Bristol office employs a third (1/3) of the staff than the New Britain office but handles a comparable number of social security cases.

The Bristol Chamber of Commerce and City Council Members made it abundantly clear that Bristol is in fact a regional hub, separate and unique from New Britain. The surrounding communities of Plymouth, Terryville, and Burlington access the Bristol office and would find transportation to the New Britain Social Security Office a hardship. In fact, the transportation infrastructure, as it currently exists, cannot meet the needs of Bristol residents and the surrounding towns should they need to travel to New Britain. The Dial-A-Ride Program from some towns will not transport clients to New Britain and is a program that is overwhelmed by current demands.

The Mayor of Plymouth testified that transportation to the New Britain Office would be a tremendous burden and nearly impossible for Plymouth residents. The town would not be able to provide Plymouth residents with access to a Social Security Office in New Britain. The Paratransit Regional Director testified that use of the town transportation system has already doubled between the years 2000 to 2006, and that they would not be able to accommodate a sudden increase for additional services.

Many residents who access the Bristol Social Security Office do not possess their own vehicle. Taking into consideration

those individuals who do own automobiles, there is no direct route to the New Britain office and the additional travel and cost of gas for those on a fixed income creates an additional burden they cannot afford.

The Bristol Social Service employees took the recommended bus route from Bristol to New Britain. They stated at the meeting that this travel entailed three hours and three transfers to make a round trip, without counting the time involved for a representative to meet with them. We cannot ask that kind of travel and time of our disabled and elderly. Additional testimony from the citizens stated that many of the power scooters and wheelchairs could not keep batteries charged long enough for the bus ride, and that the buses could not accommodate all types of these battery powered vehicles.

The United Way recently completed a senior needs assessment for the area (see enclosed). The study pointed out six areas for improvement; two of which were transportation and access to services. This study also confirmed what census research on Bristol had shown. Bristol is a city with a higher population of senior residents; it has a senior population that is growing as is the population as a whole, and it has a higher percentage of disabled in this community than other cities in Connecticut.

Finally, citizens attending the meeting expressed very serious concerns about their lack of computer access, and dissatisfaction with the telephone service they have received from the New Britain office in the past. Although the Social Security Administration offers online services, many residents do not have computer access. This would create another difficulty for many people. In contrast, citizens were extremely satisfied with the quality of service and interactions they had at the Bristol office.

The citizens and public servants of the City of Bristol have brought a new perspective demonstrating the need for a Social Security Office to remain in Bristol. They clearly stated they need the local office, and the compliments of the staff at the Bristol Office were generous and in notable quantity. We are united in believing that this proposal should be rejected. We ask that you review the issues that have been brought to our attention and strongly recommend that you reject the consolidation proposal.

Sincerely,

CHRISTOPHER J. DODD
United States Senator

JOSEPH I. LIEBERMAN
United States Senator

JOHN B. LARSON
Member of Congress

CC: Mr. Manuel J. Vaz, Regional Commissioner

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